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### Regeneration of the historic Dunbar Battery in Scotland

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## The Dunbar Battery

### Abstract

Dunbar is a historic harbour town on the east coast of Scotland. The project is for the design of a new civic space within Lamer Island Battery, a stone defensive structure built on a rocky outcrop in Dunbar Harbour. rankinfraser landscape architecture were employed by the Dunbar Harbour Trust to provide professional design services from the very inception of the project.

Our role as professional landscape architects therefore included working with the client to develop the overall brief, helping to secure funding and developing and co-ordinating the overall design through all stages. We had to carefully negotiate and reconcile the different aspirations of the client, the public and the organisations that protect the historic environment.

The project aims to improve access, create an outdoor performance and gathering space and tell the story of the battery and Dunbar. The design exploits the site's palimpsest, using the layers of history to inform and guide the design and distribution of various contemporary interventions. As a practice we are strong believers in Dieter Rams '10 Principles of Good Design', especially the maxim that "Good Design is as little design as possible". In the context of designing landscapes this translates into an approach that prioritises the importance of site along with a detailed and thorough understanding of the components that constitute the character of the place.

The design was developed in consultation with the client, local residents and children and includes new public art, interpretation of the site's history and a new community garden. Since its completion in 2017 the space has been very well received, both by the local community and professionally. Numerous events and performances have been held in the space embedding the battery in the civic life of the town. The project has also won several awards for design and renovation of historic structures.

### Key Words

Landscape Architecture; Palimpsest; Public Art; Heritage; Regeneration; Community

Note: It would be better if the theme "landscape service" could be mentioned in this abstract in short. As a reference, "landscape service" could be understood as 1) landscape architects as professionals to serve the client and/or the public or 2) landscape as a method to "serve" (or to "resolve" as a better word) different layers of existing environment. In this condition, both factors could be included for readers to have a general concept of relationship between this specific project and the theme.

### 1. Background

The Battery on Lamer Island was built in 1781 to protect town from invasion and privateers after an American ship attempted to raid the harbour. Remnants from that time include all of the perimeter wall and embrasures, a series of vaulted munitions stores and various paved surfaces. In 1874 the structure was developed into an isolation hospital, a two story

building located to the east of the defensive walls. The removal of the hospital left a large void, and a smaller enclosed space thought to be a fumigation room. The hospital closed in 1906, but was re-opened in 1914 to house convalescing soldiers during WWI. It remained a hospital until 1927 when it closed. The battery was then used as emergency housing until the mid 1930's when the roof blew off and the structure was finally dismantled.

This rich history and the traces of occupation left on site informed the location and form of the various design interventions. The timber surface of the amphitheatre for example occupies the void left by the hospital building and the material of the deck echoes the timber flooring of the hospital wards. The intriguing history of the Battery is told through an interpretive timeline set into the new access path that leads visitors from the harbour up into the space.

Note (yellow marked area): A historic image of the hospital building could be useful to further explain this idea.

From this "background" part, we learn that design of the project considers a lot of historical factors. If relevant historical images and analysis graphics could be added, readers could understand the design better.

## 2. Design Process

### Role of Landscape Architects

rankinfraser landscape architecture were the lead consultant for all stages of the design and delivery of this project, and a smaller related project to improve the setting of an historic ship's propeller. Our role included the development of the public space design from brief development through initial concepts and detailed design to supervision of the construction under a traditional contract. We aided the client in securing the bulk of the funding, managed all the statutory consent applications for Planning, Listed Building and Advertising Consents, as well as the Building Warrant Application. We led the design team, ensuring co-ordination of all consultants information and we worked closely with the main contractor and specialist sub-contractors.

The brief developed with the client Dunbar Harbour Trust during the feasibility study stage focussed on 4 themes: improved access to and within the battery for all ages and abilities; the repair and conservation of the stonework and other historic elements; the creation of a destination within the harbour to promote tourism and economic regeneration and the creation of a multi-purpose performance and amphitheatre space for local gatherings and concerts. A smaller associated project to improve the setting of a historic ship's propeller was also undertaken by rankinfraser.

### Budget

A successful funding application to Viridor awarded the project £700, 00 in 2015. Funding of £50, 000 was also awarded by Historic Environment Scotland specifically for the repair of the battery fabric. The total project cost of therefore £750, 000 with a construction cost of £490, 000 for the Battery project and £60, 000 for the improvements to the Ship's Propeller site.

### Design

The battery design exploits the site's palimpsest, using the layers of history to inform and guide the design and distribution of various contemporary interventions. The inventions were not intended to compete with, or overpower, the historic structure. Rather, the design works seek to amplify the existing spatial character whilst transforming the space into a multi-functioning public arena. As a practice we always seek to firstly understand the essential character of the landscape and only then add new tectonic layers that complement the existing site. For example the most significant new structure, the amphitheatre, is integrated into the void formed by the walls of the former hospital so as to leave the trace of the hospital untouched and the views unimpeded. The design purposely works with the existing structure of the battery and the exceptional setting and does not seek to compete with either. The robust and reduced material palette of; primarily oak, larch and concrete responds to the exposed location and complements the richness of the existing stone walls. Bespoke metal work is deliberately delicate and transparent so as not to obscure views across the site.

The Dunbar Battery and Harbour is owned by the Dunbar Harbour Trust a charity whose purposes include; social welfare and recreation, attract new uses to the harbour, public education and operating the harbour for the benefit of the people of Dunbar and the wider public. The regeneration of the battery therefore represents a significant contribution to those aims, by the creation of a new public gathering space that promotes education, public art and easy access whilst conserving a Listed Building. The project demonstrates the full skill set of the Landscape Architect, from leading the design process to helping secure funding, securing all consents and supervising the works.

#### Sustainability and Environmental Sensitivity

The battery would have continued to deteriorate had a new life not been found for the structure. Ultimately without the interventions the site may well have had to be closed to public access due to safety concerns. That was prevented and the site turned from a potential liability into a positive community asset through the energy of the client and wider design team. A process of archaeological investigation preceded and informed the design work at each stage. A responsive and sympathetic approach was taken to the discovery of further elements of historic interest as they were uncovered during the course of construction.

#### Innovation of design and technical innovation

Innovation lay in the vision of the Trust to not just to 'preserve' the historic structure but to radically reinvent the type of place it could be. The conservation approach was therefore aligned to a new and innovative public art strategy, ongoing public performance programme and community ownership and management. With the site located on a island and a weight limit on the only access bridge to the site, all materials had to be capable of delivery in small components.

#### Interpretation and Graphic Design by Studio LR

A light touch approach to interpretation is applied as this is a place for people to relax and enjoy. There are some discreet elements such as the Shipping Forecast names routed into timber steps, as well as more conventional look out points to connect the visitor with the best views of landmarks around the Battery embrasures. The graphic style is understated,

leading with typography and minimal graphic elements embedded with natural materials. The aim is to give local people a true sense of place, as well as a connection with their past and surroundings, and to encourage exploration around the whole harbour area.

### Coastal Garden

The desire for a community garden was identified during the community consultation and was included in the final brief. An area on the upper level of the battery was identified and developed as part of the overall project. The garden area includes access to viewing points aligned on the embrasures, solid oak block seating cubes and appropriate coastal planting. The ambition is that the local community will maintain the planting. An initial planting structure was implemented as part of the contract with the intention this evolves and develops over time.

### Imaginative ways of involving stakeholders

Community engagement was thorough and continuous over the course of the project with a dedicated website set up to gather views and inform local residents of progress. A key component of the project was the commissioning of a site specific contemporary artwork, 'Sea Cubes' by the Scottish artist Donald Urquhart. Parallel to the artwork project, a series of consultation events and a local schools engagement programme were undertaken culminating in a public exhibition of screen prints of plankton by Primary 7 pupils alongside new artworks by Donald Urquhart.

### Artwork — Sea Cubes by Donald Urquhart

Scottish Artist Donald Urquhart was commissioned to create a major, new site-specific artwork as part of the Battery improvements project. Urquhart has an internationally recognized practice, which includes several major public artworks across Scotland.

The form of the cube echoes that of the embrasures in the Battery walls and is derived from the cubic form of sea salt crystal (which alludes to salt panning, a historic industry of East Lothian). The reflective surface of the cubes, allows a principal component of the work to be sunlight. The orientation of the Battery will allow sunlight to be reflected towards the entrance of the structure. The upper surfaces will reflect the sky, creating eleven planes of light. The use of mirrored stainless steel creates a work that brings the surrounding environment into the work, producing a complex and shifting interactions between the environment and spectator.

As well as echoing the Battery, the work is intended to contrast the expanse of the sea, seen from the Battery, with a microscopic view of seawater and the hidden life it contains. The forms of twenty-two species of local plankton have been machine engraved on the cubes' surfaces, including the principal catch species of the Dunbar fishing boats – crab, lobster and prawn. These, engraved images, were drawn by Urquhart from photographs supplied by the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency.

There is an intentional environmental aspect to the work, drawing attention to the base of the marine environment food chains. The work was developed with regular consultation events, involving the community. There was also an extensive set of printmaking workshops with local school children.

As well as its visual dynamism the work is designed to be used as informal seating, which is why the cubes are 600mm. The location with the Battery allows the cubes to be used for elevated views out to sea or towards events in the amphitheatre.

### 3. Review and Feedback

#### Community Engagement & Consultation – Client Statement

This project is an excellent example of how community engagement together with the required investment can, in the hands of people with the vision and skill to deliver an excellent design, rejuvenate interesting architectural buildings and can give them a new and joyous purpose in the community once again. We recognised our responsibility to ensure the harbour is an attractive asset for locals and visitors to the town and we had not been making the most of its interesting landmarks. The community was involved in this project from the beginning and we undertook a consultation period in the Spring of 2014. This included carrying out a survey of harbour visitors and online questionnaire to local residents and community which helped us shape the brief for the improvement works to the Battery.

The key points from the feedback included:

- retain the open and free public access
- improve the access, addressing the issues of the uneven path made from loose material
- repair the existing fabric but not a full restoration
- better interpretation and things to see in the Battery

The design team successfully delivered an attractive but robust landscape based design which is high impact but low maintenance and appropriate for the number of visitors and the open coastal environment in which it is located. It is of its age but sensitive to the old structure and the layers of history uncovered as the works progressed – and the design was adapted to make features of what we found.

The works to the Battery were a catalyst for successful improvements in the harbour and the rejuvenation of the Battery not only means the structure is fit for purpose for the next 50 years but the new features installed gives the space a new role going forward.

The feedback to the new Battery in the community has been unanimously positive and in the year since its completion more people are visiting the harbour and staying longer to enjoy the area. The Trust has also encouraged local groups to use the Dunbar Battery for performance and events. The summer highlight was around 150 people of all ages enjoying a 42-piece touring youth orchestra from Holland, while over 200 brave souls braved the elements for a carol concert in December. This year the Trust has set up a “Friends of Dunbar Battery” community group to work on developing use of the Battery and we have already provisionally booked eight events for the year ahead and are reaching out locally, regionally and nationally to create more opportunities for all to enjoy the unique setting in Dunbar.

#### Community Event and Web Site

Since its completion in 2017 the battery has hosted various musical concerts, a Christmas carol service and it has become a sought after wedding venue in the town. The space continues to be maintained by local people including those who care for the coastal garden. In addition to its increasing use by local people the new battery plays an important role in

attracting visitors to the town from further afield. It complements other visitor attraction in Dunbar including the John Muir Birthplace museum, Dunbar Castle and the harbour. Prior to the completion of the project there was some evidence of anti-social behaviour occurring within the enclosed space of the battery. The increased footfall and transformation of the space and the perception of the space locally has reduced this significantly.

### Reflection

The scope and complexity of the Dunbar Battery commission provided an opportunity for Rankin Fraser to demonstrate the full extent of the professional services a landscape architect can bring to a project. Initially we had to study and understand both the potential of the site and the client's aspirations for what type of place this could become. The early design work was tested and adapted through review with the client. This initial design work then formed the basis of an application for funding for the project. We again offered guidance and support in that process. Much of this early work was done on a limited fee to help the project move forward.

At every stage of the project we were aware that as design professionals we had a wider social and environmental responsibility to design a space that would respect and enhance the historic importance of the battery and provide a space that served the needs of all of the local community. We achieved these aims through adding a new 'layer' of contemporary design. Building upon Dieter Rams' principle that only that which is essential should be included, this new layer is always in the service of the wider aims of the project. For example the new path is as unobtrusive as possible whilst reading as a distinct layer sitting on the rocky ground, the new railings are as visually permeable as possible and the amphitheatre structure seeks to be deliberately of lighter construction than the surrounding stone walls.

### Note:

Dunbar Battery is not a doubt a great example of landscape to resolve complex site and social conflicts. It is truly a good experience reading through the detailed thinking about every aspects of the design.

To bring this writing a little further, an additional paragraph in "3 Review and Feedback" as an "organizer" about the understanding of "landscape service" could be helpful for readers to generally recall the complex layers of this project and echo the theme. As briefly mentioned in the first comment, in this project, the service of landscape could be understood from two angles: 1) landscape architects as an organizer to combine different opinions from the client, the community, and the public; 2) landscape design as an organizer to resolve complex relationship between programs, space, history, ecology, and the most consequential of all, social impact. The attitude of landscape architects or landscape design in these process could be further explained for experienced landscape professionals to recall what landscape architecture should be about. This additional paragraph may not only respond to the theme "landscape service" but also unfold an in-depth thinking to encourage professionals to intentionally take over social responsibilities rather than only focusing on completing projects.